



POP Briefs

Voluntary Participation and Informed Choice in Family Planning

USAID has provided assistance to family planning programs for more than 30 years, guided by principles of voluntarism and informed choice. These principles reflect basic American values and are also contained in legislation, program guidelines and regulations (see Box 1). Under these principles:

- People have an opportunity to choose voluntarily whether or not to use family planning and to choose what method to use from the widest range of contraceptives available, and;
- Information is provided to help inform their choice, including the benefits of using family planning and the health benefits and risks of particular methods.

In addition, longstanding laws and policies require that clients of USAID-funded programs be offered, either directly or through referral, a broad range of methods and services, and that the voluntary and informed consent of any clients choosing sterilization be verified by a written consent document signed by the client.

On a global level, USAID participated actively in the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, at which governments from 179 countries committed themselves to respect and promote voluntarism in family planning (see Box 2).

In October 1998, Congress enacted an amendment initiated by Rep. Todd Tiahrt (R-KS), reaffirming and further elaborating standards for voluntary family planning service delivery projects to protect family planning "acceptors," that is, the individual clients receiving services (see Box 3).

Box 1: Founding Principles of USAID Family Planning Assistance

The first legislation for USAID family planning in 1967 called for: *"voluntary family planning programs to provide individual couples with the knowledge and medical facilities to plan their family size in accordance with their own moral convictions and the latest medical information"* and stated that *"the President shall establish reasonable procedures to insure, whenever family planning assistance from the United States is involved, that no individual will be coerced to practice methods of family planning inconsistent with his or her moral, philosophical, or religious beliefs."*

Program guidelines in the same year stated: *"Programs eligible for assistance are those in which individual participation is wholly voluntary and in which each individual is free to choose from, among available methods, those methods of family planning in keeping with his or her beliefs, culture, and personal wishes."*

Box 2: Global Consensus on Voluntarism and Informed Choice

At the 1994 International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD) in Cairo, 179 governments reached consensus on a Program of Action through 2015, which states: *"The principle of informed free choice is essential to the long-term success of family planning programs. Any form of coercion has no part to play....Demographic goals, while legitimately the subject of government development strategies, should not be imposed on family planning providers in the form of targets or quotas for the recruitment of clients."* In July 1999, a Special Session of the UN General Assembly to review implementation of ICPD reaffirmed the Cairo consensus and, with respect to family planning, called for *"ensuring ethical, professional and technical standards of care, as well as voluntary, free and informed choices in an atmosphere of privacy, confidentiality and respect."*



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USAID Actions to Ensure Voluntarism and Comply with the Tiahrt Requirements

Over the years, working with both government agencies and private organizations, USAID has provided assistance to national family planning programs to help them put the needs of clients first.

- **Training.** USAID has trained hundreds of thousands of physicians, nurses, and other health workers to provide family planning services, including training to improve technical knowledge of contraception and strengthen counseling skills so that providers give accurate information and communicate effectively with clients.

- **Service Delivery Guidelines.** Since 1993, USAID has supported development and dissemination of new family planning service delivery guidelines in more than 41 countries and other activities to make programs more responsive to clients under its Maximizing Access and Quality of Care (MAQ) Initiative.

- **Choice of Methods and Information on Benefits and Risks.** USAID spends from

Box 3: Summary of New Tiahrt Requirements for Voluntary Family Planning Projects

- (1) No numerical targets or quotas of total number of births, number of family planning acceptors, or acceptors of a particular family planning method, although quantitative estimates or indicators used for budgeting or planning purposes are permissible.
- (2) No incentives for family planning service providers or clients to achieve targets or quotas.
- (3) No denial of rights or benefits such as food or medical care to individuals who decide not to use family planning services.
- (4) Clients must be provided comprehensible information on benefits and risks of the family planning method chosen.
- (5) Scientific studies of experimental methods must advise participants of potential risks and benefits.

USAID must report to Congress within 60 days on any violation and corrective actions taken, or, in the case of (4), report on a pattern or practice of violations.

\$50-60 million annually to provide contraceptive supplies in more than 60 countries so clients have access to methods suited both to their childbearing goals and health needs. Funding also supports materials that inform providers and clients about different family planning methods through print, broadcast, and electronic media.

- **Research to Improve Family Planning Methods and Quality of Care.** USAID is the leading donor for biomedical research on improved contraceptives in developing countries, and all USAID programs comply with Federal research guidelines. USAID also supports extensive data collection, service delivery research, monitoring, and evaluation activities designed to improve quality of care and informed choice.

- **Policy Dialogue.** USAID promotes informed choice in all of its family planning activities. Programmatically, informed choice includes effective access to (a) information on family planning options and (b) the counseling, services and supplies necessary to help individuals decide when to obtain or decline, or simply consider their service options. For example, in an effort to expand the use of family planning options for both women and men, USAID-supported advocacy efforts led the Government of the Philippines to adopt natural family planning methods as part of the Ministry of Health's official family planning program methods. Similarly, USAID assistance helped persuade the Bolivia's Ministry of Health to include the Standard Days Method among its recommended family planning options.

- **Implementing Tiahrt Requirements.**

In consultation with Congress, USAID incorporated the Tiahrt provisions into all agreements with organizations that assist family planning service delivery projects and has communicated them to staff of USAID, implementing partners, and host country counterparts. Additional measures have also been taken to help ensure that essential information materials on contraceptive methods will be available at every service delivery point of projects receiving USAID assistance.

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